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A few years ago it might have been unusual -- perhaps even newsworthy -- for a Secretary of Agriculture to make a major statement on maternal and infant malnutrition.

Nutrition was a subject so arcane that it was left entirely in the hands of the professionals -- the scientists -- the dieticians -- the pediatricians.

They spoke -- but no one listened.

The undernourished, the malnourished, the hungry poor were invisible and largely ignored. Not because we, as a people, had no compassion but, rather, we were ignorant. We knew more about feeding a cow or a hog than we knew about feeding babies.

We know little about the relationship between a child's diet and mental development and disease.

Even some of our original welfare programs largely ignored this basic problem. We assumed that a full belly was the be-all, end-all answer to good nutrition. And we left it at that.

Historically -- and unfortunately -- our national food policy (if we had one) was geared primarily to production -- something to be measured in bushels, pounds and tons. Nutrition and food quality was a by-product of our total food system.

Then slowly the voices of the professionals and the consumer groups came to be heard.

In the Congress, such men as Senators Humphrey, McGovern, Kennedy and many others raised voices of concern. In the House, where I served on the agriculture committee, I and my colleagues became immersed in the problems of food nutrition and were appalled by the gap that existed between the production of food and its consumption.

As Secretary of Agriculture, I became determined that the Department had a primary responsibility in this area and we should do something about it.

Remarks by Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland at the National Maternal and Infant Malnutrition Conference, in Washington, D.C. on March 2, 1978.

Food quality and nutrition are a natural and logical responsibility of a Department that oversees the production of food. Furthermore, nutrition became an important mission of the U.S. Department of Agriculture when it assumed cabinet level status more than one hundred years ago -- a fact that has been often overlooked or forgotten.

It wasn't until the sixties under the Administrations of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson and the Stewardship of Orville Freeman that we really started to make some headway in this area.

Research programs and studies were launched. Legislation was enacted. We put into motion the expertise, the research facilities, the education and communication machinery that was available in the Department -- which was better oriented, had more experience, and more resources for this responsibility than any other department.

In response to wider public demand and a growing sense of mission, considerable and positive progress was made during this period. Comprehensive new meat inspection provisions became law. The Food Stamp program was born and food assistance and nutrition education for the poor improved markedly. There was even an attempt to change the name of the Department to the Department of Food and Agriculture.

Then, unfortunately, the new mission hit a hiatus during the seventies. There is some evidence extant that during that period public confidence in the Department to protect the broad public interest was eroded somewhat. At least, progress in this area slowed down.

We have a new sense of mission in the Department.

We have an Assistant Secretary of Agriculture in Carol Tucker Foreman who brings to the Department years of experience and an unparalleled record of achievements in this field. We will have a director for our newly-established Science and Education Administration to give direction to a whole new body of nutrition research and nutrition programs.

I know there are many experts and scientists -- some in this room -- who believe there is enough information available from past research from which we can build a definitive nutrition policy. Unfortunately, I can -- with the "scientific" information made available to me -- teach it round or flat. It is not only "research" provided by the industries who -- rightly or wrongly -- believe they may be adversely affected by a nutrition based food policy. It comes from every quarter and to be successful we must be sure of our facts or those who are afraid of change will find our errors and will ridicule and set back our efforts.

To put it simply and plainly, we do intend to build and administer a total national food policy from the farmer to the consumer. We do intend to give the leadership and direction to correct the pervasive problem of malnutrition at its root sources -- and that includes, to the extent possible, helping to meet the nutrition needs of people throughout the world.

Here are some of the steps we have taken to strengthen and streamline our food programs and policies in the past year:

We proposed and Congress enacted major new food and farm legislation this year. It provides for stabilizing and improving farm income at the same time it promotes more effective use of our abundant food supplies through a reformed Food Stamp Program. A key change eliminates the purchase price for food stamps. It means that more than 3 million low income Americans, who previously couldn't get food stamps because they couldn't pay the price, will now have access to the program. This is a major step forward and we are determined to get word of the change to these people and see that they have a chance to take part in the program.

A new Food Safety and Quality Service (FSQS) consolidates food inspection, grading, and procurement functions into one agency.

USDA is requiring industry to prove that pre-formed nitrosamines are absent from cured meat products after processing and after preparation for eating. FDA has been asked to review the food additive status of nitrate and nitrite in poultry products.

A new proposal on net weight provides state and local weights and measures officials with a usable guideline to make sure consumers are getting an honest measure. It cuts out allowance for shrinkage before sale and for including free liquids as part of the net weight.

FSQS has been authorized to develop and coordinate specifications for all federally-purchased food to promote greater efficiency and assure consistent high quality.

USDA-procured foods for school lunches and other feeding programs now have percentage ingredient labeling, and a proposal is being developed for the commercial market.

To help improve the quality of food in school lunches, USDA is adding fresh fruit to the foods it distributes and cutting down on sugar and salt in the canned products it provides.

With increasing concern about the relation of diet and disease, USDA has initiated a new competitive grants research program and is proposing to increase annual funding for human nutrition research by more than 50 percent in its fiscal 1979 budget.

A new Human Nutrition Center will combine research, extension and teaching activities.

Perhaps one of the most important proposals we have in next year's budget is for a major expansion of the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC).

It works through state health departments and local clinics to get a highly nutritious food package to low-income pregnant and nursing mothers, infants and children through the age of four. The program is unique in integrating health care, nutrition education and food assistance.

It was established as a pilot program in 1972.

Once enacted WIC was painfully slow in getting underway. Indeed, it was a neglected child under the previous administration. It took a court order to get the first pilot programs going.

But once underway, the program proved its worth as a successful way to aim food assistance directly at nutritionally vulnerable groups.

Over the past year -- with cooperation and support from groups such as the Children's Foundation -- the program has added 500,000 participants, so that it now reaches over a million mothers and children. With our budget request of \$535.5 million, we expect to be able to expand program participation to almost 1.5 million people.

Evaluations of the program have shown that it has resulted in significant health improvement for the people taking part. Data collected by various states between 1974 and 1977 show that WIC participants showed a substantial reduction in anemia. There are fewer low birthweight infants and less overweight and underweight problems among children in these programs.

The program has other benefits, too. A study done by the Urban Institute in 1976 showed that the WIC Program led to a 77 percent increase in children visiting the health clinics from the area served. It also brought expectant mothers to the clinics more often, and increased use of immunization programs.

The emphasis in the WIC Program has been to extend the program to areas which have the highest rates of infant mortality and other relevant health problems, especially in underserved rural areas.

As a further step, the Department has launched a special effort to reach migrant farmworkers in areas that presently have no WIC services. It's a demonstration project, undertaken cooperatively with the Community Services Administration in 13 midcontinent states. The goal is to find ways to serve migrants continuously as they move from place to place along the migrant stream.

USDA, within its fiscal 1979 budget ceiling, requested funds for a pilot mass media nutrition information campaign to be tested in four midwestern communities. It will include baseline surveys of target groups, pre-tests of media materials, and followup evaluations.

These are some of the steps the Department has taken to strengthen food and nutrition programs. We intend to do more.

But what has happened so far is indicative of the possibilities offered by a food and nutrition policy that stretches the full length of the food economy from producers to consumers.

But efforts to improve the nutritional standards of people and make quality of food a priority in our food system, are not without its problems, as you all know.

There is still the problem of public inertia to overcome. There is much basic knowledge in the whole human nutrition field we do not know as yet. There are basic differences of opinion and policies among nutritionists themselves. Some of the so-called scientific "facts" are contradictory or have not been properly and extensively researched.

Then there is the worry among many farmers and the food industry that the USDA will let nutrition and consumer concerns overshadow the demands and needs of producers, processors and distributors of food.

A reaction like this is only natural and is to be expected. Change can be a fearsome prospect for many people. But this change need not be -- nor will it be -- a cause for alarm or concern by the farmers and the processors. For in truth, it opens up new opportunities for them -- and profitable opportunities at that.

They will find that providing quality as well as quantity is just good business. The production of food -- the collecting and processing of it -- is not an end in itself. Ultimate consumption is.

People will pay more money for quality. The consumers will appreciate it. They will buy more of better food. In the end, the nation and the world will be better fed. People will be healthier. We will eliminate some of the root cause of disease and mental and emotional disorders. And farmers and all the other interests in the system can enjoy new profits.

And under our new farm programs, producers will soon enjoy a new era of economic stability and consumers will be guaranteed a continued abundance of quality food even in times of low production. And finally, we can set a new example and a new dimension in our food policies for the hungry and undernourished millions throughout the world.

Thank you.

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